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ABSTRACT

This paper grew out of the finding of a previous study that small, rural elementary school districts were noticeably absent from the list of participants in federal aid programs. The author feels that the critical problem seems to be whether the small district actually makes a deliberate decision not to participate in federal programs or whether it is systematically excluded because of its size. The study, therefore, tested whether district size was related to federal aid participation, and whether total wealth (based on total assessed valuation) was related to federal aid applications. Additionally, a measure based on assessed valuation per pupil was used to combine both size and wealth reveal any hidden relations that total wealth by itself might obscure. Results indicate that district size is a significant predictor of federal aid response, but that neither total assessed valuation nor assessed valuation per pupil show any relation to federal aid responses. (Author/WM)

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A SMALL N STUDY OF FEDERAL AID IN RURAL AND SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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Several years ago, a fairly well-publicized study of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in California presented a carefully documented case pointing up inequities in the administration of federal funds. Johnson[1] found that NDEA Title III moneys for instructional improvement in science, math, and foreign language were going to large, urban and suburban school districts. Small, rural elementary school districts were noticeably absent from the list of participants, and this meant that instructional improvements in large and fast growing districts were not available to the state's small districts. This is particularly disturbing because, according to the California Teachers Association[2], 80 per cent of the elementary districts in the state are under 2,000 ADA.

Apparently, this phenomena also existed in the first year of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Wilson Riles[3] reported that nearly 20 per cent of the districts qualified did not apply for ESEA, and 24,000 disadvantaged children went without needed educational services for one year. The inequities of ESEA were minimized in subsequent years as close to 99 per cent of participation was achieved. However, the problem of short-changing small elementary districts of federal funds may still exist in present forms and newer forms of federal aid like the Education Professions Development Act.

The critical problem seems to be whether the small district actually makes a deliberate decision not to participate in federal programs or whether it is systematically extended because of its size. Within this problem area, it is important to discover if small districts will not apply for any present or new forms of federal aid.

When Johnson studied NDEA, he used district size and wealth in terms of assessed valuation per pupil to identify federal participants. These measures seemed appropriate to study whether small districts were excluded from other forms of federal aid. Three federal aid programs were used in the present study, Public Law 874 and Public Law 815 for the operations and building in districts affected by federal activities, NDEA Titles III and V for instructional improvement and guidance programs, and ESEA Titles I and II for the educationally disadvantaged and for library materials.

Design of the Study

One northern California county and all of the elementary districts within its boundaries was chosen as the unit of the study. The districts varied in size from 100 to 5,000 ADA. The principal economic activities in the sample districts also varied from agriculture, to heavy industry, to military activities. In testing whether district size was related to federal aid participation, the ADA from 1967-1968 was dichotomized at the median for the sample of 1100. Federal aid participation for each district was obtained in interviews with superintendents. Inconsistent participation in any of the programs from 1965-1968 was not counted. Participation in the programs was then divided between the low applying districts that applied for only 1 or 2 forms of federal aid and high applying districts that applied for 4 or 5 forms. In all, there were nine elementary districts in the study, and Table 1 shows the results of the district size and federal response comparison.

Analysis of the wealth of the districts took two forms. First, to see if total wealth was related to federal aid applications, total assessed valuation was compared to federal aid response. Then, a second measure using assessed valuation per pupil was added. The second measure combined both size and wealth together, and it was hoped that it would reveal any hidden relations which total wealth by itself might obscure. Total wealth was dichotomized at the median for sample districts at $6 $\frac{1}{4}$ million within a range of $2 million to $74 million. Assessed valuation per pupil for the sample showed the same dramatic contrast in wealth.

Table 1

District Enrollment and Response to Federal Aid in Nine Districts*

District Enrollment	Response to Federal Aid	
	High (4 or 5 forms)	Low (2 or fewer)
Above 1100 ADA	3	1
Below 1100 ADA	0	5

*Chi-square value of 5.6 significant at the .02 level

The range of wealth behind each pupil was from $1700 to $72,000. The median of the sample districts was $6050 which shows these districts were generally poor. Tables 2 and 3 show the results of comparing these wealth measures to applications for federal aid.

Results and Conclusions

Comparison of the enrollments of the sample districts to their applications for federal aid shows that district size was a significant predictor of federal aid response. A district under 1100 ADA did not apply for all forms of federal aid that it might have. In this northern California county, the small district was systematically excluded from federal aid programs. This finding adds strength to the evidence presented by Johnson; however, in some ways the present study is more alarming. Even though the sample was very small, it treated more federal aid programs. By doing so, it supports a conclusion that more federal programs in this state may be operating in a way that is detrimental to small districts. At any rate, this is true in the northern California county where the study was done. And certainly, it would be true in other counties where there are similarities to the sample districts.

Table 2

Total Assessed Valuation and Response to Federal Aid in Nine Districts*

Total Assessed Valuation	Response to Federal Aid	
	High (4 or 5 forms)	Low (2 or fewer)
Above $6 $\frac{1}{4}$ million	2	2
Below $6 $\frac{1}{4}$ million	2	3

*Chi-square value of .09 significant at the .80 level

One specific finding from the present study does not agree with the Johnson study. No measure of wealth predicted which districts would or

would not apply for federal aid. Neither total assessed valuation nor assessed valuation per pupil showed any relation to federal aid responses. Within the sample, it would seem that federal aid in PL 874, PL 815, NDEA, and ESEA is distributed without reference to the fiscal ability of the school district. This seemed an encouraging finding since Johnson indicated that wealthy, suburban districts were getting more benefits from NDEA than small districts. When more federal aid programs were studied, district wealth was not related. However, the sample districts were relatively poor by state standards, and a broader sample including suburban districts may change the prediction. For the time being, it can be concluded with reasonable certainty that the fiscal ability of a district was not a good predictor of federal aid applications.

Table 3

Assessed Valuation Per Pupil and Response to Federal Aid in Nine Districts*

Assessed Valuation per Pupil	Response to Federal Aid	
	High (4 or 5 forms)	Low (2 or fewer)
Above $6050 per pupil	1	3
Below $6050 per pupil	2	3

* Chi-square value of .23 significant at .70 level

Without casting doubt either on administrators at the local level or state administrators of federal programs, the present study partially supported conclusions that small districts may be excluded from participation in federal programs. The sample districts below 1100 ADA did not appear to be applying for programs to which they are qualified. Such a finding indicates that a broad study of all federal programs is necessary to verify and correct this inequity especially in a time when both federal and state funds for education are being curtailed.